DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 433 667 EC 307 413

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TITLE University Students with Disabilities Are the Chief On-Campus Accommodation Ingredient.
PUB DATE 1997-12-12
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual CSUN (California State University, Northridge) Conference (1997).
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: <http://www.dinf.org/csun_97/csun97_086.htm>
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; *Accessibility (for Disabled); *College Students; *Disabilities; Educational Legislation; Federal Legislation; Higher Education; *Self Advocacy; *Social Support Groups; Student Empowerment; *Student Personnel Services; Student Rights; Student Role
IDENTIFIERS Academic Accommodations (Disabilities); Americans with Disabilities Act 1990; *New Mexico State University

ABSTRACT

This report describes the rejuvenation of the Barrier Breakers at New Mexico State University, a student group that was designed to ensure that students with disabilities had access to and accommodations for instruction. The new group, the Association for the Concerns of the Handicapped (ACH), provides advocacy for environmental access and program access. The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act and its enforcement led to the hiring of a disability coordinator to handle requests for accommodations and the development of several service departments at the university. Currently, the coordinator supervises a full-time interpreter and coordinates the following services: a Braille printer; early registration assistance; assistive listening devices; notetaking services; readers; sign language interpreters or oral interpreters; and accommodations for students with disabilities needing extended time, a quiet location, scribes, readers, or other assistance. Services are also provided by Student Support Services and the Center for Learning Assistance. In the process of seeking accommodation, the students learned that it was important to disclose their access needs, to organize and present a united front so that access providers could respond to specific requirements, to maintain a sense of continuity between new members of the group and veteran members, and to be persistent in requests. (CR)

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UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES ARE THE CHIEF ON-CAMPUS ACCOMMODATION INGREDIENT

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Web Posted on: December 12, 1997

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In 1985 the former New Mexico State University students with disabilities group, known as the Barrier Breakers , had grown defunct because students had graduated, others had lost enthusiasm or interest, and still others were too involved with school-work. The academic cycle took its toll as well. Group meeting schedules depended on the new semester class schedules; students who worked well together were split from their sources of support and camaraderie. It was difficult and frustrating to hold onto ones enthusiasm in the face of such apparent arbitrariness.

Questions of access and accommodation were responded to, as they are now, on a case-by-case basis, but at that time no formal procedures were in place to provide accommodation. Lack of experience with accommodation issues by the administration or administrative convenience, often formed the basis for dealing with the circumstances, and whatever office seemed appropriate was designated to oversee the provisions of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1972. Advocacy for services were often spearheaded by a beneficent faculty member, with tenure, acting as the group s advisor. Responses to requests for accommodation often came to fruition through the kindnesses of an enlightened department head or staff member and the persistent machinations of the student with the squeaky wheel . The situation was made no better by the weak enforcement capabilities of 504 - it had no teeth and applied primarily to institutions who received federal funding for their programs.

Although defunct, the spirit behind the Barrier Breakers remained alive, especially in the minds of faculty and staff who had acted as advisors, mentors, and motivators. By themselves, students were reluctant to speak out, but with backing they felt that they could be effective. And so a new cadre of provoked students and veterans of the old Barrier Breakers began to organize. Meetings were scheduled, strategies were devised, and priority lists were compiled, and the name was changed to Association for Concerns of the Handicapped - ACH. The acronym characterized the groups approach: they would be a pain in the side of university administration in their quest for access and accommodation - an ACHe in their side. They began applying the principles of the squeaky wheel , and speaking out for accommodation - for their rights to an equal opportunity in obtaining the same level of education that their temporarily able-bodied peers were receiving.

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It became apparent after the initial requests that representatives of the group would have to work more closely with the physical plant department, the department responsible for maintenance of campus grounds. The staff was only dimly aware of the need for access and how to go about providing it, while

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those asking for access were not clear or vigorous enough in expressing their needs. Supervisors were provided drawings of sites that needed to be modified with ramps, railings, braille signs, elevators, larger restrooms, tables replacing desks, etc. They also made on-site inspections of problem areas to assess, first- hand, the cost of materials and labor necessary to provide the access. Simultaneously, group members were encouraged to express their access needs based on the understanding that needs could be met only when the providers recognized the nature of the accessibility request. The technique worked, though results were slow in coming at times because of maintenance priorities already established. Nonetheless, the two groups who had occasionally been at odds with each other, were talking the same language.

Improvement of environmental access was one focus of advocacy, another focus concentrated on improving program access, a more complex, politically charged process with seemingly questionable requests for accommodation, such as extra time for students with learning disabilities who were test taking. For professors steeped in the traditions of the academy and its strictly observed learning techniques and strategies, these requests were dumbfounding, irrational, and absurd to say the least. Such requests were unacceptable in view of the apparent unfair advantage that extra test-taking time would give to students who were granted this type of program access. This was a situation that required a more sophisticated approach than the informal exchange of information between students and physical plant personnel. The students recognized that circumstances called for a new strategy - a more formal and centralized process that would carry the weight of university policy, and one that would simultaneously respond to the concerns of the faculty and the students.

Meanwhile, across the nation advocacy was on the rise and a new enthusiasm was filling the air. People with disabilities eagerly anticipated the creation of the most comprehensive civil rights legislation since the Civil Rights Act of 1964. All the signs indicated that a change was about to occur and that access would become the law of the land. Indeed, President Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) into law in June 1990. In a sense, Section 504 had grown up. It had served as a model for the ADA, but ADA came with enforcement capabilities - a full set of teeth. Lip-service to accommodation requests was no longer an adequate response. Although student advocacy was approaching the limits of its effectiveness with respect to environmental access, which was considerably improved, requests for accommodations became an on- going, familiar process. Complementary to this, students became more willing to disclose their access needs, they began to focus more on program access, and the legal complexity of accommodation issues were increasing. It becoming clear that an ADA coordinator was required to respond to requests. Eventually, this and other requests were answered by the university administration and a coordinator was hired.

In addition, accommodation for students with disabilities was addressed in a number of ways, but principally through the development of several service departments at New Mexico State University (NMSU). For example, the Services for Students with disABILITIES, established to respond to requirements of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, provides information and services which assist students with disabilities in personal and academic adjustment to university life. In addition, assistance is provided to procure auxiliary aids,coordinate services and resources on and off campus, discuss special needs and accommodations for students with disabilities, and serve as consultants for university students, faculty, and staff regarding questions about various accommodations for students with disabilities. The SSD works to ensure that students with disabilities have physical and programmatic access to all programs and services that will effect their full participation in the campus community.

Formerly the position was part-time and few resources were available to the coordinator, but as services became more available, under ADA guidance, more students began to make use of them. To keep up with demand for services, the position was beefed up to full-time in 1993 with a coordinator who also acts as a classroom interpreter. Currently, the coordinator also supervises a full-time interpreter coordinator/interpreter and coordinates the following services:

- a Braille printer for students who request that their tests, handouts, and syllabi be printed in Braille;
- early registration assistance;
- Assistive Listening Devices and a Closed Caption Decoder may be available for short term loan

by students with hearing impairments;
- students with learning disabilities, hearing impairments or hand-function disabilities may be eligible for notetaking services;
- students with visual impairments or with learning disabilities may be eligible to have readers for books, handouts and/or tests;
- students with hearing impairments may be eligible for sign language interpreters or oral interpreters;
- accommodations may be made for students with disabilities needing extended time, a quiet location, scribes, readers or other assistance.

In addition, the Student Support Services (SSS), helps NMSU students and students with disabilities to succeed academically in a number of ways. Established as one of several TRIO programs by the Department of Education, SSS helps first-generation college students and/or students who meet low income guidelines to pursue their education by providing the following services:

- Mentors - participants are matched by age and major with a peer mentor to plan goals for the year based on their personal and academic needs;
- Tutors - participants are eligible for tutors in two subjects on an individual or group setting;
- Typing - class assignments may be typed by the secretary or participants may use word processing equipment available in the SSD office;
- Exam File - sample files from courses are on file for participants to review and sharpen their test taking skills;
- Computers - computers are available to use with tutorials in chemistry, algebra, and calculus, for example;
- Cultural Enrichment - through the program, participants can attend plays, symphonies, operas, museums, choral performances, art exhibits, foreign films, and ballets;
- Workshops - participants can attend a variety of workshops designed to help them in their academic and personal endeavors.

The NMSU Center for Learning Assistance is a another component in the system of support services available for students with disabilities. Although the Center directs its efforts to help all students develop the skills that they will need to excel in college, it also provides specific services for students with learning disabilities. One of its service components, the Learning Disability Intake Interview, is designed to determine if students with learning disabilities will need further testing to discover as yet undetermined needs and to discover what services are already available of which the student can take advantage. Other services available to the students include:

- Drop-In Service - students can meet with a facilitator on an individual basis to help set a specific goals and to design customized learning skills program;
- Credit Courses - students can improve their personal learning skills by enrolling in courses offered on an individualized or small group basis;
- Academic Achievement Service - students can attend one-hour workshops offered several times each week focusing on specific study or learning skills;
- Computer Workshops - workshops in the use of word-processing and other software are available;
- Project Support: A Re-Entry Program - for older, returning students, this program eases the transition from home or work to the university by sharpening their study skills and reintroducing them to academic environment;
- Focus Groups - participants can register for workshops that meet for three to six sessions on selected topics, such as speed reading and standardized psychometric tests
- Cognitive mapping - participants can helped to understand their individual learning styles by completing questionnaires.

In the process of seeking accommodation, the students learned that it was important

- to disclose, i.e., communicating their access needs, not necessarily their disability, so that service providers could respond with the appropriate accommodation;
- to organize and present a united front so that access providers could respond to specific requests rather than to scattered requests to which they would prioritize based on their own needs;

- to maintain a sense of continuance between new members of the group and veteran members who had been the groups prime movers in the past and who were advocating for access even before ramps and elevators were common sights; and
- to be persistent in requests.

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